



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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NEW RESCUE BOAT MAKING WAVES IN FAYETTE COUNTY WATERS

Uniontown, PA – As more and more people flock to Fayette County’s waterways each summer, first responders are enhancing their capabilities to keep tourists – and locals – safe.

Adah Volunteer Fire Department recently added a 15 ft. Mako Skiff water rescue boat to its equipment lineup, allowing for better coverage of the Monongahela River along the county’s western edge.

“Adah, alone, has coverage of the ‘Mon’ for about 10 miles, stretching from Masontown to near Isabelle. This is only the second boat in the whole pool in Fayette County, from Gray’s Landing to Maxwell,” Adah VFD Chief L.C. Otto said. “Luzerne Township was the first to get a boat in La Belle, which is at the opposite end of the pool, so this will help us fill in the gaps of water rescue coverage.”

Equipped with 3D sonar capabilities and various rope systems, the new boat can navigate through as little as four inches of water and gives firefighters and other emergency personnel additional resources for water-related incidents.

“We wanted to enhance our response protocols to be able to better serve our communities and the many tourists that visit Fayette County. The areas along the river can be pretty transient in population, due to various boat clubs and campgrounds. A lot of Adah homes are used as ‘summer homes’ and only occupied a few months of the year for their riverfront access,” Otto said. “Outdoor recreation – especially post-Covid – has increased dramatically, so now you have an advanced risk of incidents while swimming, jet skiing, boating, kayaking and even fishing due to that extra traffic. We’re already responding to incidents where we wouldn’t have been called previously.”

GO Laurel Highlands Executive Director Ann Nemanic said one of the “key reasons” visitors travel to the Laurel Highlands region and Fayette County is to “enjoy and experience our outdoor recreational product.”

“We have seen continued growth in those adventure opportunities, including mapped waterways for easy navigating soft water opportunities and buildout of additional hiking, biking and mountain biking trails,” Nemanic said. “With all those activities, safety for locals and visitors alike remains paramount. The ability to support and provide the proper and necessary rescue and safety equipment is essential to maintaining the very best and safest experience possible.”

Otto said the boat will primarily be used to deliver medics to patients; deliver patients to safety; tow disabled vessels to shore; transport water pumps for fire services; and even aid in cadaver searches. Additional equipment will be added to expand the boat’s capabilities in the future, and Adah firefighters

are actively completing boater safety and water rescue certification courses to better serve their communities.

“We’re mutual aid, so anybody that needs it – any other fire departments in Fayette or Greene counties – it’s here for us all to use,” Otto said. “We’re talking about starting a river rescue team, because we have people interested in volunteering for water rescue through the department that may not be interested in fire service.”

Fayette County Emergency Management Agency Planner/Training Officer James Bittner said the boat will also help the Fayette County Water Rescue Team as an additional resource for “flatwater with boat access and also navigable rivers that we can launch onto” in search of people and objects potentially lost in the water.

“It will allow for a faster recovery and assist divers in locating objects. We currently have to rely on sonar technology from mutual aid, and this will benefit us because it’s in the county and can arrive quickly. We’ve had a few missing persons incidents near water that we lacked this tool for,” Bittner said. “We still have a gap and are working to acquire a portable sonar unit for our team that can be used in inflatable boats that can access more remote areas.”

Bittner said the boat was already used to assist the United States Coast Guard in investigating a kayak and personal flotation device found drifting along the Monongahela River earlier this summer. While the kayak was confirmed to be unmanned and returned to its owners, Bittner said having Adah’s boat nearby for quick use was very beneficial.

“It was conveniently located near the incident, and Adah VFD was willing to assist the county team,” Bittner said, adding his team responds to swift water, ice, still water and flood rescue work.

The boat was purchased with funds from a \$25,000 Fayette County Hotel Tax Program grant. Otto said, without the hotel tax funding, the closest rescue boat would’ve previously taken 30 minutes to 1 hour to arrive in their area.

“It gives people a sense of security knowing there’s a water rescue boat in their vicinity,” he said. “That funding was crucial.”

Fayette County Commissioner Scott Dunn said it’s extremely important to keep our residents and tourists safe.

“That responsibility falls on our fire departments and EMS. I’m a proponent that some of our hotel tax, generated by tourists, be used to equip our departments,” Dunn said. “We’ve previously been able to grant rescue quads to several volunteer fire departments that are regularly being used to respond to emergencies.”

Commissioner Vince Vicites said the county has granted a total of \$2,791,782.36 in these funds over the last few years.

“The funds have been distributed all over every corner of Fayette County. Many projects would not have been possible without this opportunity,” Vicites said. “These grant-funded projects have improved the quality of life in Fayette County – community by community.”

Commissioner Chairman Dave Lohr said Fayette’s abundance of outdoor activities helps make our area an “attractive stop for tourists” and, in turn, makes tourism “an important economic driver” for the county.

“While fun on the water is a significant draw, activities on the water come with inherent risks. It is incumbent upon us to ensure that, when difficulties arise, we are prepared to respond; and part of preparedness is having the right equipment to deal with the situation,” Lohr said. “The Hotel Tax Program is one way to feed back into, support, and ultimately grow our tourism industry. We are blessed to have a coalition of dedicated partners in this area. I’m pleased to support the purchase of a fast-water rescue boat. Providing for the welfare and safety of visitors and residents alike is to the benefit of all.”

For more information about the Adah Volunteer Fire Department, visit www.Facebook.com/AdahVFD.

To learn more about Fayette County, visit www.fayettecountypa.org.

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